

VZCZCXRO7236
PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHLB #0281/01 0710811
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 120811Z MAR 09
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4405
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 3565
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 3768
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000281

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO A A/S WARLICK
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT
DOD/OSC FOR FOURNOY, KAHL, AND DALTON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/09/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [IR](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: LEADER CLOSE TO SYRIA COMMENDS FELTMAN
AND SHAPIRO FOR U.S. ENGAGEMENT

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Former prime minister Najib Mikati, who once had (and whose family still has) a close relationship with Syrian president Bashar Asad, commended visiting NEA Acting Assistant Secretary Feltman and NSC Senior Director for the Middle East and North Africa Dan Shapiro on March 6 for planning to visit Syria the following day. Mikati said that the Syrians were open to a relationship with the U.S., but warned A A/S Feltman against the U.S. imposing demands, using third country facilitators, or speaking about Lebanon to the Syrians. Mikati inquired whether the U.S. could lift any sanctions against Syria as a confidence-building measure. Hopeful about indirect talks between Syria and Israel, Mikati was more reserved about U.S.-Iranian engagement. End summary.

U.S.-SYRIAN
ENGAGEMENT "SMART"

12. (C) Visiting NEA Acting Assistant Secretary Jeffrey Feltman, NSC Senior Director for the Middle East and North Africa Dan Shapiro, and the Ambassador met with former prime minister Najib Mikati and his nephew Azmi T. Mikati at his residence in Verdun on March 6. DCM, Pol/Econ Chief, Senior LES Political Advisor, and NEA Staff Assistant also attended the meeting. Mikati, who has not seen Syrian President Bashar Asad since 2005 but whose brother and nephew maintain close relations with President Asad, welcomed the U.S. administration's new approach towards Syria and Iran, describing the move as "smart."

13. (C) Mikati indicated that Syria needs healthy relations with the west, particularly with the U.S. He recommended that the U.S. adopt a "give-and-take position" with the Syrians and warned against imposing demands, predicting this would get the U.S. nowhere. Responding to A A/S Feltman's criticism that France gave Syria a lot and received little in return, business-minded Mikati proposed the U.S. start with a "letter of credit" approach, explaining that the U.S. should "open a letter of credit and withhold full payment until fulfillment of all terms and conditions."

14. (C) Mikati noted that countries like Egypt, Jordan, Turkey

and Saudi Arabia tried in the past to facilitate relations between the U.S. and Syria, but that the Syrians preferred to deliver the "goods" directly to the U.S. He outlined several issues shared by both the U.S. and Syria, citing concern about Al Qaeda as the primary example.

¶15. (C) Mikati inquired whether the U.S. could lift the sanctions it imposed on Syria, such as the ban on exporting computers and other commercial products. He suggested such a move was a good confidence-building measure.

AVOID TALKING ABOUT
LEBANON TO SYRIANS

¶16. (C) On the eve of A A/S Feltman's and Senior Director Shapiro's trip to Syria the next day, Mikati advised him to refrain from speaking about Lebanon with the Syrians, "let them feel that Lebanon's independence and sovereignty is a fait accompli." In Mikati's opinion, raising the issue of Lebanon with the Syrians could send the message that the U.S. is willing to bargain over Lebanon. (Note: As it happened, the Syrians themselves raised Lebanon with the U.S. delegation. End note.)

HOPE FOR SYRIAN-ISRAEL TRACK;
CAUTION ON TALKING TO IRAN

¶17. (C) Mikati said he hoped the new U.S. engagement with Syria could advance peace talks between Israel and Syria. He

BEIRUT 00000281 002 OF 002

disclosed that Iran is "extremely annoyed" with Syria over its indirect talks with Israel, claiming "Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei was very harsh on the Syrians because of their peace negotiations."

¶18. (C) Mikati expressed caution regarding U.S. openness with Iran, saying that the U.S. should involve the Saudis and Egyptians; otherwise, he said, the Saudis and the Egyptians could fear U.S.- Iranian engagement at their expense."

¶19. (U) NEA Acting Assistant Secretary Jeffrey D. Feltman and NSC Senior Director for the Middle East and North Africa Dan Shapiro have cleared this message.
SISON